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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 000389

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [ECON](#) [KDEM](#) [JO](#)

SUBJECT: OPPOSITION ATTACKS GOJ MINISTERS, POLICIES AS NEW
POLITICAL SPACE OPENS: HOW LONG CAN IT LAST?

REF: A. AMMAN 304

[1](#)B. AMMAN 381

[1](#)C. 03 AMMAN 8605

[1](#)D. AMMAN 350

Classified By: Amb. Edward W. Gnehm for reasons 1.5 (b) (d)

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (S) Recent royal and government statements encouraging greater political openness have led to new and more open public and private debate on important public policy issues, including school curriculum reform, contemplated price increases, and government spending on social programs. The debate has also produced allegations of corruption against ministers and the former PM, and these allegations have begun to touch on the Palace in private conversations. While most GOJ officials have expressed only irritation with these developments up to now, the increasing volume of public criticism and its increasing inferences to the King could prompt some in the GOJ to consider constricting the newly opened political space. END SUMMARY.

JORDAN BEGINS A "SILLY SEASON?"

[1](#)2. (C) Statements by King Abdullah, PM Faisal al-Fayez, and other GOJ ministers in the new, reform-minded cabinet encouraging greater political openness and dialogue on national issues have met with some success. Since the beginning of the regular session of Parliament on December 1, there has been lively (and often irresponsible) public and press discussion of public policy issues, including curriculum reform (ref a), revision of the military pension law, and a call from a group of MPs to abrogate Jordan's treaty with Israel (ref b). Private conversations with MPs and senators indicate that other government programs and reforms may come under similar scrutiny in the coming months, especially proposed government price hikes on petroleum products and pharmaceuticals, privatization of large state industries, and priorities for social spending and the Social and Economic Transformation Program (SETP). Most Embassy contacts believe that the swift proliferation of topics of debate (particularly on domestic and governance issues) and the sharp increase in frequency and volume of criticism of government programs is indicative of a new, larger political space.

RIFE WITH (ALLEGATIONS OF) CORRUPTION

[1](#)3. (S) While this more vigorous debate and the increased political space is a positive development, it has definite down sides for the GOJ. For example, there have been direct and public charges of corruption against Planning Minister Bassam Awadallah and former PM Ali Abul Ragheb (refs c and d). MP Abdullah Akaileh (East Banker, Tafileh, former member of the Islamic Action Front), during the December 2003 debate on confidence in the new government, openly accused Awadallah of corruption. When pressed by PolCouns January 13 on the specifics of his allegations, Akaileh said he believes Awadallah has paid off journalists to write positive stories about him, and expressed doubts about the propriety of spending in Awadallah's SETP, claiming that much of the money was being used for "handouts" rather than social development. He claimed that he would lead a parliamentary request for full disclosure of all money spent to date on the program.

[1](#)4. (S) Akaileh also attacked Awadallah's personality, describing him as arrogant, fast-talking, and a person "with no idea what goes on in a Jordanian village" (a veiled reference to Awadallah's Palestinian origin and Western orientation.) Akaileh also accused Communications and Information Technology Minister Fawwaz Zoubi of nepotism (promoting his sister in law to a senior rank in the ministry). Other MPs also leveled allegations of corruption against immediate past PM Ali Abul Ragheb, and threatened to open a parliamentary inquiry. Abul Ragheb was forced to call on the Parliament speaker and state publicly that he had no objection to such an inquiry, after an ill-advised TV

interview in which he admitted to what amounted to minor offenses just as he denied allegations of major ones.

15. (S) In private, several MPs and NGO activists have begun to criticize the King directly. One East Bank tribal MP told PolCouns recently that the King had chosen a fractious government that would never win the confidence of average Jordanians, and that he should correct this mistake by appointing a new government "with the proper political base" (i.e. political and tribal figures without a technocratic background). More disturbing for the Palace are growing private expressions of concern over the King's continued confidence in controversial figures like Awadallah against whom there have been (widely believed) allegations of corruption, and whispers of Palace involvement with less than reputable business deals.

HOW LONG CAN IT LAST?

16. (C) Most Jordanians have reacted to the wider bounds for public debate with cautious optimism. One NGO head told PAO and PolCouns that he would initiate new democracy programs "to fill the new political space." All the MPs and senators with whom we have spoken told us they felt more free to express criticism of the government in public, and several pledged to continue to press the envelope of permissible public expression. (One added that she hoped the debate would remain polite and based on provable facts, not emotional outbursts).

17. (C) Some remain skeptical. MP Abdullah Akaileh described the recent expansion of freedom of expression in the context of a historical cycle of expansion and contraction of political space that began under King Hussein. He expected the current tolerant government attitude to last no more than a year or two. A former MP dismissed the new debate as transitory, and declared that she would refrain from pushing the envelope in public to avoid what she expected would be political retribution from the government in the future.

18. (S) Many in the government are beginning to express irritation at the increased level (and personal nature) of the criticism. Finance Minister Abu Hammour told the Ambassador that, when he had suggested in a cabinet meeting that the government welcome a parliamentary investigation of the government's financial practices, Awadallah reacted angrily and threatened to resign rather than face the indignity of such an inquiry.

COMMENT

19. (S) Although open criticism of the royal family remains taboo, the recent expansion of political space in Jordan seems to be real, and has resulted in public debate on public policies -- including education and pension reform -- that had received little such attention in the past. It remains to be seen, however, whether the newly expanded boundaries of expression are here to stay.

110. (S) The GOJ's less-than-forthcoming initial responses to the curriculum reform debate (ref a) and corruption allegations indicate that many in the government -- even among "reformers" -- are not used to dealing with public criticism or composing convincing arguments to support their policies. Thus far, senior GOJ officials have expressed only irritation at the criticisms, but it is unclear whether they will be able to gird themselves for the long haul. The danger in the quick expansion of public debate and the allegations against senior officials (and, by implication, the King) is that some may conclude that Jordan is not yet ready for "responsible democracy" and press to rein in public dialogue.

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